

Business Case Study

ENERGY STAR[®] Home Sealing

Comfort Company, Washington C.H., Ohio
Vic Aleshire, Owner

Vic Aleshire has come a long way since his initial days as a contractor focused on low-income weatherization. Since he got started in 1989, Vic has been looking to differentiate from other insulation and heating and cooling contractors. Although the weatherization work was steady, Vic noticed middle and high-income people had similar comfort and safety problems and were willing to pay to fix them. So, Vic targeted these customers and focused on solving their problems with air sealing and other home performance solutions.

In 2000, Vic started the Comfort Company, based 30 miles south of Columbus, Ohio. In two short years, the Comfort Company has doubled their gross sales and Vic expects to continue their exponential growth by the end of 2003. His insistence on high quality service and offering the “whole package instead of a piece” has driven this success. Vic says, “We’re not the cheapest wheel on the display rack.” He makes it well known that he will back his truck up and walk away from a job if the customer is not interested in doing it right the first time. It sounds crazy, but judging by their referral business and the reputation he has built in Ohio, the strategy is working.

The Comfort Company has a diversified set of products and services. They sell and install several types of insulation and high efficiency heating and cooling equipment. However, most of their revenue is driven by the services they offer. The Comfort Company offers diagnostic testing, air sealing, duct sealing, combustion safety testing, training, and consulting services. Currently, Vic has a staff of seven mostly comprised of technicians but the sales staff is growing. For the past two years, Vic has primarily acted as his own marketing and sales department.

Vic says, “You can have the best inspectors in the world but you can’t teach everyone how to talk to people and educate.” Fortunately, Vic has lots of practice and credibility. Vic is a certified instructor for Bacharach, a national company with products and services for combustion technology, heating and cooling, and environmental monitoring. For more than twenty years, Vic has trained weatherization contractors in the field on the proper use of blower doors and air sealing techniques. He has also been an active participant in the Affordable Comfort organization, often acting as a speaker at their conferences. Locally, Vic is a certified instructor for Ohio codes training and the Comfort Company is very active with the local Home Builder Associations, banks, and state programs focused on energy efficiency. These affiliations and contacts obviously increase referral business and reputation but it isn’t enough. So, how does Vic proactively market his services?

Vic believes strongly in spending the money and time to participate in local home shows and expositions. He has done the Columbus, Dayton, and Cincinnati home shows in the past couple years and each time generated enough leads for 5-6 months of work. At each show, Vic uses a

model he calls the “House of Pressure”, a 3x4x5 foot model that visually demonstrates air leakage and the effects of a house operating as an interrelated system. Vic had over 300 leads from the last show he did. The primary source of continuous advertising for the Comfort Company is their Yellow Page ad. Vic cautions others however to make sure you use it effectively. His company is listed in nine sections of the Yellow Pages and makes sure to use terminology that an everyday homeowner can relate to like “draft proofing” instead of “air sealing”.

Vic’s hard work, marketing strategy, local and industry affiliations are all reasons he has been so successful, but his persistence in educating customers has been the key ingredient. For starters, Vic and his staff use a blower door on almost every job. Additionally, they use a duct blaster, infrared thermometer, and moisture meters to test room level moisture. Every air sealing job they do includes duct sealing. Vic will walk away if the diagnostics show that duct sealing and combustion testing is necessary and the customer doesn’t feel it is critical. The bottom line is that he doesn’t want to be blamed for poor performance, or worse be liable for the safety of the family, after he has completed a job. Further, if they are responsible for installing new heating and cooling equipment, the Comfort Company will only sell high efficiency (90 AFUE+ and 12 SEER+) units.

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The following steps used by the Comfort Company to sell and diagnose homes are credited for their success in turning opportunities into jobs. During inspection, they use a digital camera, laptop, and a short presentation that is ‘plug and play’ using pictures they have just taken. In other words, Vic will use pictures of problem areas or concerns in the house and plug them into a presentation template. He will then sit down with the homeowner and show them their actual findings and make recommendations. As a follow up, the Comfort Company provides a full detailed report in their proposal that includes the same pictures that the customer has already seen a couple times. This proposal will also include return on investment and savings information derived from a software program using the data collected during the diagnostic testing.

So, what is Vic’s advice to other contractors considering home sealing and home performance services? “Do your homework. Many contractors don’t understand how air moves.” Vic’s states, “The lion’s share of the work we do is customer education.” This philosophy has allowed the Comfort Company to differentiate, grow, and provide value-added services to their customers.